

“What’s Happening on This Corner?”  
September 10, 2023

Jeremiah 31:10-12  
Mark 9:14-29

A week ago on Saturday morning, our church and our little corner here at Jefferson and Clinton appeared in the Iowa City Police Blotter three times. Small things, really, with the possible exception of that broken window. And it is said that all publicity is good publicity, so we’ve got that going for us.

Still, one might ask: “What’s Happening on This Corner?”

Well, quite a lot, actually. This morning and on the Sundays ahead, I want to offer some answers to that question. There are several answers—and they all point to a vital congregation living out our faith on this corner and in the larger community and world as well.

As our new church school year gets started today my first answer is: We are living out our concern for children and youth.

We worry about our children—and with good reason:

The burden of poverty falls disproportionately on minority children.

A recent report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Pediatrics* concluded that for 1-year-olds, spending two or more hours a day in front of screens —television, video, mobile phones or other digital devices — may increase their chances of experiencing developmental delays in subsequent years.

This past week the *Press-Citizen* ran an article with the title:” Shortage of youth mental health services in Iowa reaches crisis; families are in despair.” One teenager said: "It feels like people just want to push us away. It feels like they don’t understand what we go through. When we try to get the help we need, we can’t get the help we need. It’s more like people don’t care."

We worry about our children.

Concern about children is nothing new, of course. Over and over the gospels tell the same story: a parent runs up to Jesus and asks for help.

A Canaanite woman—a Gentile outsider—seeks healing for her daughter from this Jewish healer;

Jarius, the leader of the synagogue, approaches Jesus when his daughter is at the point of death;

And there is the father that we heard about this morning. Entering into this story we learn about faith and about the well-being of children.

The father is beside himself, not knowing what to do. Our hearts break as we hear his story and sense his deep fear. Anyone who has had a seriously ill child knows how he feels. Anyone who looks with compassion at children of this city and this world knows his feeling. We are concerned about our own children and the children around us.

This father is desperate. In his desperation he first brings his son to the disciples of this healer, this Jesus.

And in spite of the power that they had received they are unable to do anything.

I always take comfort in the ineptitude of the disciples as they are presented in the Gospel of Mark. They don't understand Jesus. They can't use the power that he has given them.

So we have a close connection with them, don't we?

Even today the followers of Jesus and their congregations can disappoint. We're not everything that people want us to be. We're not everything that people need us to be. Often we don't even live up to our own standards. It seems that as individuals and as a congregation or a denomination or even as the larger church we aren't able to bring about the changes that are so desperately needed.

William Barclay suggests that at such times, one "must press beyond...the servants of Christ to Christ. The church may at times disappoint us, and God's servants on earth may at times disappoint us. But when we press our way face to face with Jesus Christ," he concludes, "we are never disappointed"<sup>1</sup>

So watch what happens as one person presses forward through disappointment to the living Christ.

This father tells Jesus: "I asked your disciples to heal my son but they could not do so."

And Jesus, not always patient with his feeble followers, cries out: "How much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?"

We discover this Jesus again and again as we read the Gospels:

As fed up with us as we sometimes are with ourselves.

Wanting the world to know that healing he offers, and frustrated by his followers who can't seem to bring that wholeness to others.

Yet, through the frustration, Jesus hints at healing as he tells the father: "All things can be done for the one who believes."

If only it were that easy.

Listen in the story and listen in your own heart as faith and doubt collide: “I believe,” the father responds. “Help my unbelief.”

Now, I hear those words in two ways.

We all need some help with our unbelief. O, that our *unbelief* could be made stronger.

We’re all too ready to believe anything. We live in a time of great credulity.

Lord, help my *unbelief*.

At Harvard Divinity School we used to call it a *holy skepticism*, a *sacred doubt*. It’s the ability to look at things, not so much with a jaundiced eye, but, well, squinting in order to discern both the real and the phony.

We live in an age when people are ready to believe just about anything. I saw a flier from a church announcing a class that will provide proven tactics for parents. Maybe. But I’ve got my doubts.

O, help our unbelief.

Help our unbelief. Teach us, O God, to have a healthy doubt in the face of all that promises a quick and easy solution to the difficult and enduring problems that beset us.

Help us to be slow to believe all the religious and political and scientific hucksters whose voices are so loud.

There is, of course, another meaning to that prayer: “Help my unbelief.”

This father comes to Jesus and his “if you can do anything” gives voice to his doubt. He comes to Jesus not because he trusts him but because he is willing to try anything.<sup>2</sup>

Gaylord Noyce used to teach at Yale Divinity School. He wrote about “people who want to believe but can’t. They drop their children at Sunday school and think for a moment about staying for church themselves, before going home for morning chores or the Sunday supplement. Or they do stay, sitting in the back pews. But they have trouble *believing*.”<sup>3</sup>

Maybe he’s talking about that friend of yours. Maybe he’s talking about you.

So “Help my unbelief,” we cry. Meaning, really, help me *to believe*. Help me to have some measure of faith, some trust in the beneficent purpose of the universe, some conviction that God is love and that God loves me. Help me to make some sense out of all that perplexes.

We pray like this because we recognize that our *faith* has an impact on the well-being of our *children*, on the well-being of the children in our community and our world. And so

we seek to strengthen our faith, our belief that God does care about what happens in this world.

Here's what often happens. Men and women who for years had little to do with the church wake up one day and find a child or several children living in their house. Life has changed.

And what are they going to do? Well, some go to church. We come to a congregation such as this hoping—what?—that somehow this will protect us and our children. Or maybe the church will help us to raise them properly, help us to raise them so there will be no problems.

O, help our unbelief. There is no quick solution for the problems children face. There is no quick solution for the problems parents face. Not even in a church. Not even in this church.

Yet, still, help our unbelief. If you are concerned about the well-being of children, first of all, take your own faith—and your own doubts—seriously. It's kind of like the warning that we get about those oxygen masks on airplanes. Put your own mask on before you try to take care of those around you. First, make sure that *you're* breathing.

All of us involved with children and youth—inside or outside our families—have a difficult and sacred task. Those who are raising children, those who teach, those who care for homeless children in Iowa City, who help feed hungry children, who seek the peace of children in places torn by war are engaged in deeply spiritual work. It is rewarding, but you know that it is also demanding.

And that is why a congregation such as this one is so important.

We will only be effective in what we do as we tend our own spirits and nurture the faith that supports our action.

So it is that when the father leaves with his restored son, Jesus speaks to his followers about prayer.

And we all know how difficult prayer is. Or at least I do. Prayer invites us, however tentatively, to believe.

“All things can be done for those who believe,” Jesus says. And his words here cause us a great deal of confusion. We know very well those things that were not done when we prayed.

In effect, Jesus is inviting the disciples—inviting us—to live closer to God. Prayer will keep and maintain the power that they had received.

William Barclay, again, tells us there is a deep lesson here. God may have given us some gift, but unless we maintain close contact with God that gift may wither and die. Unless

we maintain this contact with God, we lose two things however great our gift may be: We lose vitality—that living power that makes for greatness. And we lose humility.<sup>4</sup>

We enrich the gifts that we have received by ongoing contact with the God who gave them. We are not up to the tasks on our own.

We worry about our children. We are never completely secure. And, to our constant fear at any age, neither are our children. We reach out in faith. We pull back in doubt.

This, of course, is why we have a program of Christian education for all ages, why we have a youth group, why we hold a confirmation class. Some years those programs have a large number of children and youth in them. At this time of rebuilding, the numbers are smaller and still our work and our hope continues.

This is also why we support the work of United Action for Youth and Open Heartland. We want to be there for the children and youth that we know and the children and youth that we don't know.

And we are. And we will keep on being present, keep on showing the love of God, keeping open to the new growth and rebuilding that God is doing in us and among us and through us.

All of us involved with children and youth—inside or outside our families—have a difficult and sacred task. Keep at it.

What's happening at this corner? We are seeking to support children and youth and university students and others as we move together through these difficult and challenging days, seeking to follow in the way of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Wm. Barclay, *Gospel of Mark*, pg. 224

<sup>2</sup> Mark, *Interpretation Commentary*, pg. 165.

<sup>3</sup> Gaylord Noyce, *Why Can't I Believe?* pg. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Page: 5

Barclay, Mark, pg. 225 ff.